

Original Paper

Ruralized or Not? Lived Experiences of Remote Distance Learning Students of the Institute for Distances and E-Learning (IDeL), University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the variation in experiences of remote rural students who study with the Institute for Distance and e-Learning (IDeL) of the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) in Ghana. The study adopted the qualitative research strategy. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for the study. Purposively, three remote centres were selected. Ten (10) students were selected across the selected centres for the study. Data obtained from the study centers were analyzed thematically. The study found that lived experiences of the learners on remoteness depended not only on their geographical locations but were also relative to individual circumstances. With respect to students' sense of connection with university staff and peers, most mentioned their contact with their personal tutor. Networks with peers were less common, a matter of concern if peer networks are integral to fostering improved retention and progression. It was recommended among others that IDeL should promote the use of various cell phone Smart Identity Modules Cards (SIM Cards) by students in remote areas, to enable them gain access to any of the cell phone network coverage in their rural setting.

Keywords

distance learning, remote students, learning communities

1. Introduction

Distance learning is often seen as an obvious choice for many students with access limitations because it can provide higher education without the necessity of attendance at a campus, and geographically remote students are a case in point. However, little is known about the ways students in remote areas experience study, which could indicate their levels of satisfaction and show strategies to increase retention rates.

Literature primarily from Australia and North America describes the experience of pupils that engage in blended or distance learning (for example, Lowrie, 2007; Hannum, Irvin, Lei, & Farmer, 2008), or in Northern Europe, the experience of pupils within small rural schools and policy innovation for community schools (Kvansland, 2004). The bulk of literature on distance learning for remote students focuses primarily on instructional design and user experience (Ritzhaupt, Stewart, Smith, & Barron, 2010; Mason & Rennie, 2004; Rennie & Mason, 2005). Overall, there is a sense that the development of fixed and mobile Internet infrastructure has meant that since distance learning is steadily adopting online media, there is less need to be engaged with location or rurality. The tendency to see the Internet as something that offers equality of access regardless of location is ever-present in the literature (Rennie, 2003).

The idea to conduct the research reported here was born out of concerns that the variations in students' experiences related to individuals' circumstances, and their locations may be overlooked. In this study the context of rurality is used to explore this variation, and apply a subtle understanding of what rurality is and what access means to rural students in distance learning. This study sets out to establish what factors influenced remote students' understanding and experience of studying with the Institute for Distance and e-Learning (IDeL).

The provision of support to remote students has been a concern of the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) since its inception because of its mission to be open to all students, regardless of their situation. Catering for remote students is particularly relevant in Ghana, where approximately 50% of UEW distance education students live in rural Ghana (Owusu-Mensah, AdjeiBieni, & Owusu, 2014). This may be because a focus on online learning within distance education as the best solution for all learners obscures our understanding of the range of contexts in which distance learning is experienced.

This paper focuses on exploring the lived experiences of remote DE IDeL learners and how support can be offered to these learners. It addresses the question, What are the lived experiences of distance education students in the remote rural areas as a way to explore the variation in students' experiences of learning with IDeL, UEW, in Ghana?

Rural educational research is often based on particular sectors with a prominent focus on compulsory education and ongoing professional development for teachers or health care professionals. Rural communities are increasingly being recognized as complex and heterogeneous places, particularly in relation to the lives of "hidden rural others" and to questions of exclusion (Agyeman & Neal, 2006).

The hiddenness partly relates to the dispersed nature of comparative disadvantage within rural populations. The apparent hiddenness of rural deprivation, coupled with a perception of close social relations, can lead to situations where individuals are unable to access or are reluctant to seek help or advice.

Debates around exclusion often centre on accessibility. Inherently geographic, they ask us to think about the location of individuals and of services (Gray, Shaw, & Farrington, 2006). However, in rural areas the solution is not simply a matter of road improvements and subsidized bus services (Farrington & Farrington, 2005). Access is spatial, but it is also relative to the individual (Farrington, 2007). Account must also be taken for how accessible education is for different individuals. This understanding of access as relating to the individual and the individual's location reflects an increasing awareness within rural literature of the idea that rurality itself is subjective. This suggests that despite the apparent "evenness" of access afforded by a move toward online delivery, location is probably an oversimplification for distance learning provision.

According to The World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially recognized sources (The World Bank, 2016), rural population (% of total population) in Ghana was reported at 45.32 % in 2016. Access to electricity (% of rural population) in Ghana was reported at 66.6 % in 2016 while Individuals using the Internet (% of population) in Ghana was reported at 34.67 % also in 2016. Improved water source, rural (% of rural population with access) in Ghana was reported at 80 % in 2015 while current rural transport systems consist of the provision of road infrastructure and transport services. In most developing countries, efforts have been geared more towards rural road infrastructure development, aimed at improving accessibility. Nonetheless, without appropriate and affordable means of transport rural communities will remain isolated and poor. Transport services provide rural communities access to markets, health services, education, and other essential services, often located in more urban areas. In Ghana, attempts to improve rural access remain very much "road-development" oriented, partly due to a limited understanding of and data on the role of rural transport services in the socio-economic development of the countryside (Kingrafteradiant, 2018).

The study centres which formed the study sites are located in some of the deprived districts of Ghana. Most of the students who study at these centres live and work in hard-to-reach areas which do not have good roads, and also lack basic facilities like electricity, health, portable drinking water and libraries. These conditions are likely to influence the academic work of these students. This is yet to be explored

2. Method

In order to gain a rich picture of the experience of remote and rural students on the distance education programme at IDeL, a qualitative research approach was adopted and is characterized by the collection and analysis of qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Semi structured interview guide was used to collect data for the study, with the intention of providing an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of the participants in this, case the remote rural students on their experience of study with

IDeL, UEW of Ghana.

2.1 Sample Selection

The study purposively selected three out of the 40 study centres. These three centres were selected because they are located in rural districts based on the World Bank classification (GPEG, 2016). The three centres were found to be homogenous and so could give a homogenous sample for the study (Clark, 1995). Again, the nature of the study has the tendency for liberal replication and so has to exercise a degree of certainty (Yin, 2017). In all, a sample of ten students took part in the research of which seven were males and three females. The selection of these students was based on the fact that they represent a group who could provide the needed information on the experiences of rural students studying through the distance mode.

2.1.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Permission was sought from the Distance Study Centre Coordinators to approach these students. After pre-notifying the students through their Coordinators, the structured interview guide was administered at the three sampled Study Centres.

Once students were pre-notified, they were contacted and the instruments were administered. Responses from the interviews of students were recorded. In the interviews, students were asked to comment on their various challenges and experiences in their rural settings which serve as hindrances to their successful distance education.

By reading the transcripts iteratively, it was possible to identify a number of common trends in students' experiences. I describe these trends in the Findings section below and illustrate them with quotes from student responses. The aim was to paint as full a picture as possible of the variations in perspectives of respondents based on the principles of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The relative openness of the coding in relation to the semi-structured nature of the data collection method employed led to a meaning-oriented analysis that accounted for emergent themes. The use of specific examples to illustrate generic themes was also used as a way to focus on developing student-led narratives (Punch, 2005).

3. Result

Two themes came out strongly from the study. These were experience of being rural and students' connection (networks) and their academic work.

I was interested in investigating students' understanding and experience of their location, especially their sense of being ruralized or not. The beginning of this section reflects the initial response of many students to the question about whether they recognized themselves as living and having their study centre in a remote or rural area: "[I] Why do you consider your location and Study Centre as Ruralized? Is it the environment, geographical location, population or social amenities?"

Remote rural life was inevitable since that was their main abode and they had no other option than to cope with the challenging conditions and make good use of the few better conditions to produce

positive results for themselves. All the ten students admitted to being ruralized. However, when those experiences were explored in greater detail, students' personal challenges emerged. Surprisingly, the responses cut across all the sampled study centres. The most outstanding condition students projected for being ruralized was because they lack constant electricity supply which is an impediment to their private studies at night. While others were complaining of inadequate supply of electricity, some responded that electricity is not available in their residence at all because they lived in the most remote part of the rural settings. The electricity at their study centre was also not reliable because of the regular power outages on the national grid.

A sense of remoteness was also apparent to respondents when they had to access distance education services that were geographically remote from them. For example, students spoke about the challenges they had in accessing the internet to support their learning, academic researches and be updated with current educational issues. Cellphone network coverage was either too weak to be used as a hotspot for internet services or was not available to allow them to make calls to linkup with their tutors for clarification of points during private studies.

In connection with the above challenges, Akrugo, a student from the Northern Sector of Ghana, responded bitterly:

Am indeed ruralized because comparing my rural residence and the location of my study centre to that of the urban located study centres, I am lacking many updated information to review literature for my project work. I relied on old books collected from an old library, miles away from friends and relatives.

This comment was corroborated by Nelly, a female final year student from one of the deprived centres, as follows

If we had wide coverage cell phone network here, I would have hot spotted my laptop computer for well updated literatures from the internet. So with this lacking, do you expect my academic output be better than that of colleagues in the urban settings?

While many remote rural students do access face-to-face sessions, the main way that people access education in their homes is through study materials such as hard copies of learning modules and interactions with their tutor or fellow students. They do not have access to adequate cell phone network coverage or the Internet or the telephone and as such, everyone within the sample had this challenge. It is clear that communication technology plays an important role in participants' understanding of remoteness because they were not able to use online tools to access learning services, entertainment and other services, and use of these is assumed to be integral to their way of life.

Another sense of remoteness also evident to students' responses for being ruralized, was the difficulty of gaining access to public transport to attend tutorials from their residence or go for health care or to visit relatives in main hospital as well as poor climatic conditions. This was reflected in comments about how they gain access to their study centres.

Timothy, whose study centre is located in the middle sector of the country, responded that:

Poor road network from my village to the study centre has been my headache. If you miss the early

morning minibus, then forget about your tutorials because it will return from town in the evening. Transportation is frequent to towns only on market days and market days are not on weekends. Despite this, the cost of transportation is unbearable and I have to forgo tutorials at times if there is no money.

Angela from the Southern sector also responded:

Gaining transportation from my residence to my study centre isn't so challenging because vehicles are always plying the road but the un-tared road gets too dusty during the dry season throughout the journey and it is so bad to my health as Asthmatic patient. The road also gets too muddy during the rainy season and most cases gets over flooded for vehicles to ply. I can't compare myself with students in urban study centres whose roads are never cut off by heavy floods.

The poor road networks and unavailable public transport contribute to the learner's sense of being remote. However, that sense of remoteness is accentuated by individual circumstances (such as lack of personal transport). Another complicated factor is the high cost of transportation which is a major challenge to most poor students. Most students also are very tired by the time they reach their study centres due to the distance and the poor roads. In the examples, distance within distance education is subjective. It is a relational concept where accessibility is relative to an individual's location, their personal circumstances, and the means they employ to gain access

My interest in students' interactions relates to the idea that developing a sense of belonging to an academic community is important to a university's retention and progression strategy (Yorke, 2004; Longden, 2006). The value of this sense of community has been accepted among mainstream scholars, but establishing conditions that encourage it presents unique challenges to distance learning providers (Thomas, 2002; Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011). In this study I wanted to establish whether students situated at study centres located at remote areas in Ghana had a sense of belongingness to the UEW IDeL. In addition, I was interested in networks within rural development; for the purpose of this study, networks are referred to as horizontal (local or between peers) and vertical (extra-local or within a hierarchical organization) (Arnason, Shucksmith, & Vergunst, 2009). The term horizontal networks refer to student peer networks and the term vertical networks refer to the degree of integration with university staff.

The main link that students mentioned was their contact with and access to their personal tutors. Connections were made and ties maintained depending on face to face meetings during tutorials but due to lack of internet facilities and wide cell phone network coverage, students could not use online forums, email, group and individual telephone calls. This impeded students learning pace since they could not reach their lecturers outside the normal contact hours.

Sabina from the Northern Sector of Ghana responded that:

I wish to be in touch with my tutors to further explain an aspect of the learning modules for me through e-mails and phone calls but the facilities are not available. How can I complete my learning modules on time for exams if I meet my tutor once a week for tutorials? In fact being ruralized is not helping me

at all.

Philip from the southern sector of Ghana also responded:

Because we are ruralized, change in schedules such as when to write quizzes does not reach us on time, likewise the hard copies of our learning modules. I believe this does not happen at study centres located at the urban areas in Ghana.

Denteh from the middle sector of Ghana responded with frustration that:

No one can convince me that we can be tagged as being urbanized when our learning modules are always late in arriving and some even don't get to us at all even after examinations. How can we learn and perform as equal as those who have the learning modules at the urban centres? We are ruralized.

The range of communication channels which are used reflects the strength of this challenge (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Most respondents reported infrequent communications with centrally based staff and stated that this challenge is due to limited communication channels available (among these, emails and internet facilities dominates). These reports support other research in this area that suggests two distinct networks or academic communities exist within distance learning: course teams and office-based staff being one, and tutors and students the other (Correia & Davis, 2008).

So far vertical ties have been discussed, which are connections between students and employees of the university, such as tutors and UEW IDEL supporting staff. The tie with the tutor was seen as the main tie with the institution. When participants talked about being students or members of an academic community, they referred to connections with their tutors and coordinators, as the vertical ties as well as their peers as the horizontal ties. In this study, the participants found the horizontal ties very useful in supporting their learning. This was conveyed in the following comments Humphrey a Southern sector student had this to say

Through group discussions and meetings, we used to meet to do peer teaching and learning so that colleagues who are good in an aspect of the courses can lead us to cover much of the learning modules before the next tutorials. All we need during tutorials was clarification of points from our tutors.

Humphrey's views were supported by Benedicta from the north as follows

When we meet as peers, we are able to teach ourselves most of the things individuals find it difficult to understand because different people understand different topics in the modules.

There was, however one major challenge associated with the group discussion which was their geographical dispersion. Most students stay far away from each other. This challenge was succinctly expressed by Emmanuel of the Middle sector of Ghana in the following words;

We had challenges with the group works or peer forums because most colleagues live wide apart. To meet as a group to discuss issues gets quite challenging and depending on cell phone conferences are too expensive to manage. Therefore we meet once in a week for group discussions.

4. Discussion

Two themes emerged from the study. The sense of being ruralized and networking. With the former, students perceived that their geographical locations are hindering their academic work as a result of lack of basic infrastructure and distance from their peers and tutors. These experiences, however, differ from individual to individual. This finding from the study suggests that it is difficult to characterize remote rural students as having uniform needs or requirements in terms of support from the university because of the variety and range of perspectives represented here. This goes to support the view that rural communities are perceived as being complex and heterogeneous, particularly in relation to the lives of “hidden rural others” and to questions of exclusion (Agyeman & Neal, 2006). It is probably also true to say that many of the access challenges faced by remote students are common to other ruralized students as well irrespective of their location across the country (Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011).

Challenges associated with networking with peers was rather common. This was due to the fact that students stay away from one another making it difficult for them to meet regularly. Their situation is worsened by lack of internet facilities and wide cell phone network coverage, to facilitate online forums, email, group and individual telephone calls.

As pointed out in the literature review, most mainstream scholars recognize the value of this sense of community in fostering learning, but it is extremely difficult for distance teaching providers to establish conditions that encourage it (Thomas, 2002; Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011). This challenge assumes higher proportion in developing countries like Ghana where ICT infrastructure is limited especially in the rural communities (Owusu-Mensah, AdjeiBieni, & Owusu, 2014).

Online tools are part of the solution, mobile network communications, technological-based instructional materials, adequate and prompt supply of learning modules are needed to support tutorials and maximize student retention (Yorke, 2004; Longden, 2006). Nevertheless, care must be taken so that a focus on availability and infrastructure does not obscure the importance of individual circumstances in shaping peoples’ experience of place.

5. Conclusion

This case study of remote rural distance learning students explores lived experiences of remoteness in relation to the themes: their experiences of being ruralized with their study Centres and connection with their academic work, through the Study Centres of UEW IDeL. The findings from the study have some implications for IDeL. The major implication is the need for IDeL to promote the use of various cell phone Smart Identity Modules Cards (SIM Cards) by students in remote areas, to enable them gain access to any of the cell phone network coverage in their rural setting to enhance their interaction with peers, tutors and the IDeL staff as whole.

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